

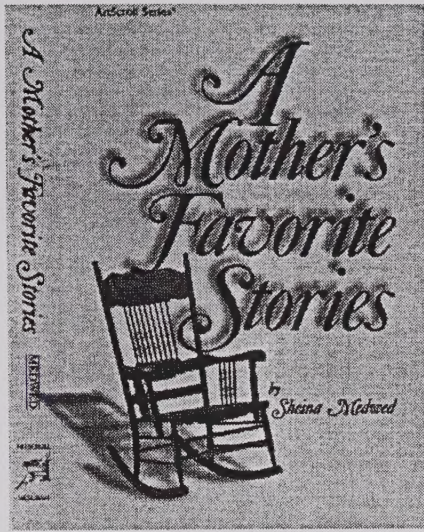


ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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Bubbie, Tell Me Your Life

Tisha b'Av, 1492, was the final day for compliance with the edict of the Spanish expulsion. Although it was a day of national mourning, the Rabbis of that generation declared, "Take up your instruments." Thus the Jewish community marched out of their host country with the musicians at the lead. Not only did the Rabbis want to infuse the refugees with hope, they also wanted to remind them that there is only one place in the world worthy of tears being shed when we must leave there. That place is Jerusalem.

The inner command to "take up our instruments"- to begin again with renewed hope - has been the mandate of the Jew throughout exile. In recent history the most moving and remarkable examples of this have been the survivors of the Holocaust. Having faced death so many times, having endured unspeakable physical tortures and difficulties, the liberated survivor needed a different kind of courage: the courage to face his tragic experiences and move on to rebuild his life.

Mrs. Leah Kaufman epitomizes such bravery on all fronts. Laden with nightmares of unimaginable personal horrors and losses, Mrs. Kaufman arrived in Canada, orphaned and penniless. She succeeded in rebuilding her life, becoming the proud mother of three sons, an outstanding educator, and an active member of the Jewish community. As for the past, it was locked in memory's vault, for half a century unseen and unmentioned.

There it would have remained perhaps forever, had not the urgent need to speak out arisen. Lest the world forget and be bereft of its memories, Mrs. Kaufman

bravely unlocked hers. Speaking not just for herself but for the hundreds of thousands whose voices were silenced, she relived the pain of Transnistria, a place whose horrors have long since gone untold because it left its survivors mute.

Although Mrs. Kaufman speaks to us all, it was as a mother and grandmother that she first began telling future generations about a past that must never be forgotten.



One afternoon in Montreal, as Mrs. Leah Kaufman stood at her kitchen sink preparing supper, her four-year-old son ran into the house, sobbing. "Mommy, Mommy," he cried, "do you know what happened to children in the Holocaust?" He put his arms around his mother and buried his face in her apron. Suddenly, his older brother, Seth, who had been in another room doing homework, ran out, grabbed him by the shoulders, and dragged him into their bedroom.

"David," he shouted, in a voice far more adult than his six years, "never, *ever* talk to Mommy about the war or about Nazis!"

Their mother held onto the kitchen counter unable to move. A memory flashed through her mind. It had happened a year ago, when she was in a local bookstore with Seth. There on a display counter they had encountered an oversized book with a big bold title: *Transnistria*. Seth had tugged at her hand, saying, "Mommy, isn't that where you were? Don't you want to buy the book?" She had hastily pulled him out of the store. Once outside, she bent down and looked deep into his eyes, which reflected confusion, and said, "I don't want to know. I just don't want to know."

Now, as she stood at the sink with the midafternoon sunlight slanting through the kitchen windows and the red geraniums blossoming in their white flower boxes, Mrs. Kaufman forced herself to pick up the vegetable peeler and continue her preparations for supper. Before her marriage, she had made the decision not to burden her children with her suffering. She wanted to raise them as normal, Canadian children. She would speak only one language when it came to the Holocaust: the language of silence.



Years passed since the scene in the kitchen. The boys grew, married, and raised families of their own. Pesach, 1991, found the Kaufmans at the home of Seth, now a doctor and leader in a Jewish community. A new generation of Jews was being raised, a delight to both parents and grandparents.

In the midst of the family gathering, Talia, then only eight, suddenly went over to her grandmother and said, "Bubbie, please come sit with me." Mrs. Kaufman willingly sat down on the couch next to the little granddaughter she loved so much. She was completely unprepared, though, for Talia's next words.

"Bubbie, please tell me what happened to you when you were a child."

"Just a minute, Talia," came the somewhat nervous reply, "and I'll come right back to sit with you." Mrs. Kaufman went over to her son and asked in hushed tones, "What should I do? Talia wants to know."

"Mommy," said her son, his expression suddenly serious, "please don't repeat the mistake you made with me. Tell her. Use your own judgement. I trust you."

Mrs. Kaufman went to sit on the couch, took her granddaughter's hand, and began her story.



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"You know, Talia, we can't always understand how G-d runs His world. There are many things that happened to me that are very sad. But look -- here we are sitting together and I want you to know that for whatever His reasons, G-d was always making incredible miracles for me and for many other people. He became our partner to help us in every way.

"My mother, your great-grandmother, was a midwife and healer. She helped anyone who came to her, Jew and non-Jew alike. When I was little, I would often be awakened by a loud banging on the window -- Boom! Boom! -- and shouts of, 'Domna Bracha, come quickly! We need you to deliver a baby!' My mother also knew what to do if someone was sick. She knew about herbs and special little cups to put on the skin and leeches to pull out the diseased blood from the body. She learned from her mother, my grandmother, who was also a healer.

"Anyway, I remember that one night when I was just about your age there was a banging on the window. This time, though, it wasn't an urgent call for my mother to help. No, it was to warn us to flee because the next day soldiers would be arriving. My mother woke me and my brothers and sisters and dressed us in layer after layer of clothing. When we left the house and made our way to the road, we saw many other families. They were all running away.

"We went to another city and took shelter in an empty house. We stayed there for a few days and prepared for Shabbos. On Shabbos, as we were sitting around the table with the wooden shutters closed, we suddenly heard a loud pounding on the shutters and the door. My mother and father told us to run and hide. My brothers and sisters and I obeyed.

“Soldiers burst in through the front door. They saw all the plates at the table and the leader shouted, ‘Where is everybody!’

“My parents said nothing.

“Then he threatened, ‘If they don’t come out, we will shoot you.’

“My parents called us back into the room. The soldiers lined up all seven children one by one behind each other, with the tallest standing in the back and the smallest in the front. This was so that they could shoot all of us at once using only one bullet. We said good-bye to each other. They picked up their rifles and were about to pull the trigger when suddenly their leader shouted, ‘Put down your guns!’

“ ‘Why?’

“ ‘Put down your guns!’ he repeated in a booming voice. To this day, I can hear the boom of his voice inside my head. Then, in a much softer tone, the leader said, ‘I can’t kill her. This woman brought me into the world and saved my life many times. I can’t kill her. Let’s go.’

“That’s the first time I was saved. But that was only the beginning of many difficult and terrible times. The Rumanian soldiers were brutal to the Jews and they forced us to walk in the freezing winter from place to place. We had to sleep in haystacks and on the frozen ground. Many people became sick and died just from the cold.

“One of the next places we stopped was right near a bakery. The delicious smell of the freshly baked bread made our hunger pains even worse. Small as I was, I was always a fighter. I said to myself, ‘There must be some way we can help ourselves.’ Everyone else was lying down but I was sitting up watching the door of the bakery. I saw a little girl go out of the bakery and I

called to her in Rumanian. She was shocked. She had probably never talked to a Jewish child before. But she was curious, like most children, so she came over to me and said, 'What do you want?'

"I said, 'How old are you?' It turned out she was my age. 'Where are you going?' I asked her.

" 'To school,' she replied.

" 'Do you like school?'

" 'I hate it -- because I'm not smart.'

" 'What grade are you in?' I asked.

"She told me and I told her to bring me her books. She did. I took one look at what she was learning and said to myself, *I'm going to be her tutor!* I said to her, 'Don't go to school today. Sit with me and I'll help you. Tomorrow you'll know everything.'

"She sat with me and I helped her. Then she went into her house and told her mother. Her mother was so pleased that she sent out a loaf of bread. As long as we stayed there, we had bread everyday.

"My mother very much wanted us to have a chicken for Shabbos and she had an idea of how we could get one. We had all had pierced ears from the time we were young. We were four sisters and my mother so there were five pairs of gold earrings. As we were marching, the Rumanians stood on the sidelines trading things. My mother traded all our earrings for a chicken. She sent me with it to the *shochet*. When I brought it home, she plucked the feathers and opened it. The liver didn't look quiet right to her, so she sent me back to the *shochet* who looked at the liver and told me it wasn't kosher.

"By this time we were very hungry, but my mother said, '*Kinderlach, mir turren dos nisht essen* -- My children, we are forbidden to eat this.'

“My mother and my brothers and sisters never lived to eat chicken again.

“The weather was getting colder and colder and we were being forced to march again. I was always on the lookout for ways to survive. As we walked, I watched the faces of the Rumanian soldiers. I saw that the one who was holding onto the horse leading the wagon didn’t have such a cruel face. I went up to him and said, ‘What is it to you if I die?’

“He looked at me and said, ‘What do you want little girl?’

“I said, ‘I want to live. Let me sit in your wagon.’

“He bent down, picked me up, wrapped me in blankets, and lifted me up onto the wagon. And that is how I survived the march. From time to time my older brother would come to check up on me and bring me news from the family and little things to eat.

“Depending on where we stopped, I sometimes slept in haystacks, hidden deep under the hay. Because of my fair skin and blonde hair, and also because I spoke Russian, I would often run away and find a Russian family in the woods. I would tell them, ‘I’m a Russian child who lost her family and I’m very hungry,’ and they would give me crusts of bread. Sometimes they would take me into their fields to let me dig up a few potatoes. Whatever it was, though, was never enough to quiet the hunger pains.

“The Ukrainian children were very, very cruel. They had a game when they caught a Jewish child. They would say, ‘Jew, say *kookooroisa*.’ In their language that means corn. To say it, you have to know how to roll the ‘r’ properly. *Baruch Hashem* I passed that test many times.

“One by one my brothers and sisters died. My mother and I were left alone, until finally, one cold and bitter day, she too, died, and I was left on my own.

“I decided to try to make my way to Mogilav where I hoped to find relatives. I walked for months, all alone, fending for myself. One day I came upon a little cafe owned by a woman. I asked her for some food, which she promised to give me if I would be willing to wash dishes in return. I agreed, and she sent me to the pump in the yard with the dirty dishes. I did the best I could, and brought the dishes inside. She said, ‘Do the other side.’ And she sent me back. That’s how I got my lesson in how to wash dishes! Once she realized that I could be trusted she let me help her every day.

“One day, she came to me and said, ‘How would you like to come home and sleep in my house?’ That was an unbelievable offer! I replied without hesitation, ‘I would like that very much!’

“The first night I was there I had a very frightening dream and I screamed in my sleep in Yiddish. The woman woke me up and said, ‘Lydia’ -- that’s what I called myself because Lydia was close to Leah – ‘why did you scream that way in a language I couldn’t understand?’

“I told her the truth, that I was Jewish, and she said, ‘Your secret is safe with me. Just don’t tell another soul.’ From that day on, I was always with her.

“One day, a group of German soldiers came into the restaurant and after they ate, ransacked the place, breaking dishes and smashing furniture. The owner was hysterical and I was terrified. When we had calmed down, I said to her, ‘Madame Bakouska, they were planning it!’

“She asked me, ‘How do you know?’

“I told her, ‘I understood what they said to each other. They didn’t want to pay, so they planned the whole thing.’

“She started laughing so hard I thought she had lost her mind. I asked her, ‘What’s wrong?’

“She hugged and kissed me and said, ‘Lydia, you will never have to worry again. You will be my child.’ We made a secret signal between us so that I could tell her whenever I overheard the Germans planning to do damage. She would then cross the street and bring back an equal number of Ukrainian soldiers. When the Germans saw the soldiers, they would pay their bill and leave. Her business prospered and my situation was a good one.

“Suddenly, things changed. On the corner, next to the cafe, was a drug store. One day the druggist stumbled into the cafe drunk and said, ‘You’re doing well because she’s a Jew’ – he pointed to me – ‘and she understands what they’re saying.’ From that day on we were on the alert. But what happened next was much worse than I ever expected.

“One day two Jewish Kapos came into the restaurant. They were working for the enemy. When they found out I was a Jewish child, they kidnapped me and put me on a train bound for the Piciora concentration camp. I was in shock! How could fellow Jews do that to me?

“When I arrived at the camp I went into the barracks and took stock of the situation. I decided then and there that I had to escape. Everyone there looked near death. It was no place for me. I walked outside and looked around. Near the main gate was a little bush. I lay down near the bush. I was watching the guard and the guard was watching me. After a few days under the bush, a moment came when the gates were open and the eyes of

the guard were on other things. I picked myself up and walked straight out. I said to myself, 'If you survive, you must remember this day.'

"Then I started my journey all over again, back to the town of the cafe and eventually, after the war, to Canada."



Mrs. Kaufman had been holding Talia's hand with both of her own. She looked at her granddaughter's face and could see the questions and the sadness in her eyes.

"Talia, I'm going to tell you one more thing, and then it's enough for this visit, okay?" Tali nodded her head as her grandmother continued.

"After the war, when I was liberated, I became an apprentice to a dressmaker. But it turned out she wasn't interested in teaching me anything about a needle and thread. What she really needed was someone to stand in line for food and provisions because we were under the Russian occupation.

"One day, when I was in the backyard beating the dust out of a carpet, a man came up to me and said, 'Are you Leah?'

" 'Yes,' I answered.

" 'I'm your brother!'

"He took me away from that house and helped me get into an orphanage that was in the brand-new wing of a hospital complex. It was a special place for children who were staying in Bucharest, waiting to go by boat to *Eretz Yisrael*. We waited there a few months. The very night before I was scheduled to leave for Israel, I had severe stomach pains. The doctors discovered that my appendix had burst. I was taken to the hospital in a coma. It was one of the miracles Hashem did for me that the

orphanage was located in a wing of the hospital so they were able to get me there so quickly. The chief surgeon, though, said I was beyond surgery. But an orthopedic surgeon who was present said, 'You have given up on her. I would like a try,' and he operated on me. Remember, this was in the days before they had penicillin. Even today, G-d forbid, a burst appendix is very dangerous.

"Well, this doctor put tubes inside to drain out the infection, and although I was in a coma for a whole month, I recovered. But Talia, I want you to know that the ship that left for *Eretz Yisrael* never made it there. It was struck by a torpedo. To this day, no one knows who did it, whether the Russians, the Germans or the British. But because I was very, very sick, I wasn't on that ship. My burst appendix saved my life!

"So you see, Talia," Mrs. Kaufman concluded, "everything I was given, was given to me for a purpose. My gift of speaking many languages, my ability to quickly read people's faces and understand them, even my illness -- all were part of the miracles that *Hashem* did to save me."

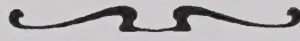
Mrs. Kaufman rose from the couch and Talia ran off to play. For the rest of the day, Mrs. Kaufman kept asking herself, "Did I do the right thing? Did I tell her too much?" She kept a close watch on her granddaughter and the next day, had her answer when Talia came over to her and said, "Bubbie, I have to talk to you."

"Okay, honey. Here I am. What do you want to say?"

"Bubbie," Talia began, "the day you die, it's gonna rain very hard." She spoke emphatically, her face serious.

"Talia, why is it going to rain so hard?"

"Because all the angels Hashem had sent to be your partners till now are going to cry so hard because they won't be able to watch over you anymore."



It is said in the name of the Chazon Ish: For those who went through the devastating Holocaust and lost their belief, we can say nothing. For those who went through it and held on to their belief, we must stand up in awe.



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